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TAGS: PREL PGOV IN

SUBJECT: FORMER HARYANA CONGRESS CHIEF MINISTER DITCHES PARTY

Classified By: A/PolCouns Atul Keshap for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The departure from the Congress Party of Haryana heavyweight Bhajan Lal muddies the political landscape in the state and weakens the Congress Party's electoral prospects. Bhajan Lal commands a considerable following among certain sections of the state's non-Jat community. By splitting a part of this vote from the Congress and, if he teams up with the Jat-based Indian National Lok Dal, Bhajan Lal could inflict damage to the Congress in national elections expected before May 2009. It is fortunate for the Congress that state assembly polls in Haryana are three years away. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Bhajan Lal, a former Haryana Chief Minister and long-time Congress Party heavyweight in the state, formally split from the party on December 2 to launch a new political outfit, the Haryana Janhit Congress. In a heavily attended rally in Rohtak, Haryana, Bhajan Lal and his son, sitting Congress Member of Parliament Kuldeep Bishnoi, sharply attacked Sonia Gandhi and incumbent Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda. Bishnoi said of Sonia: "She has no concern for your interests or sentiments." He accused her of "undemocratically" foisting Hooda on the state and ignoring the aspirations of the people who wanted Bhajan Lal as Chief Minister. He attacked Hooda as the "most corrupt Chief Minister of the state" and charged him of being in the pocket of the big industrial houses like Mukesh Ambani's Reliance.

¶3. (U) The Rohtak event took on the flavor of an election rally as Bhajan Lal and his son promised a litany of goodies for the electorate. The list included completion of the controversial Sutluj-Yamuna Link canal to bring water to the state, an increase in old-age pensions, free medical treatment for senior citizens, abolition of property tax for residential property, and a new pension scheme for women. Since state assembly elections in Haryana are three years away, the father-son duo appears to have their eye on the national elections which are due before May 2009.

¶4. (C) Comment: Bhajan Lal and his son are no doubt disgruntled politicians who were shut out of power by the ruling Congress. It would be unwise, however, to dismiss their rebellion as a trifling matter for the Congress in the state. Bhajan Lal has long been a player in Haryana

politics. He was Chief Minister of Haryana for 11 years in the 1980s and 1990s and also served in Delhi as Agriculture Minister and Environment Minister under Rajiv Gandhi. He was widely expected to become Chief Minister in 2005 when the Congress Party returned to power in the state. Playing vintage caste politics, Sonia Gandhi passed him over because he does not belong to Haryana's dominant Jat caste. The departure of Bhajan Lal and his son does not bode well for the Congress Party's prospects in Haryana because they command a good following in certain sections of the state's electorate. At the least, their departure means a split in the Congress Party's vote in a four-way contest that will pit the Congress against the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), the Bharatiya Janata Party and, now, Bhajan Lal. At worst, it could spell disaster for the Congress if Bhajan Lal teams up with the INLD to consolidate Jat and non-Jat votes in the state.

**¶5. (C) Comment continued:** What was striking about the event in Rohtak were the harsh words used by Bishnoi to attack Sonia Gandhi personally. While there is frequent infighting among Congress Party units in the states, few have dared to point fingers directly at Sonia or Rahul for fear of being cut out permanently. Bishnoi's remarks indicate that the split is real and not merely bluffing and posturing. There is speculation that Bhajan Lal's older son, who is Deputy Chief Minister under Hooda, will follow his father and brother out of the party.

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